Growth and Development of the West End Area

Two models of urban development provide useful filters through which we can understand the growth of Boston and the West End Area. One model sees growth as slow and incremental, responding to the population and economic growth building by building, street by street (Figure 1). The first new elements in undeveloped areas often utilize the natural advantages, the shoreline in the case of the West End, and accommodate uses deemed undesirable in the more densely settled center, as the almshouse and jail were in the West End. A second model sees the evolution of the city as a series of bold enterprises, accepting the challenges of building whole neighborhoods all at once as was the case in the West End residential area after 1959, and even creating the land to build on (Figure 2), as when the Charles Street Jail site, much of Massachusetts General Hospital, and The Embankment was made by filling the Charles River Estuary.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Both models are very much a part of Boston's history. The colonial downtown district, the North End and Beacon Hill grew primarily in the pattern of the incremental development model. The model of ambitious large-scale development better describes the growth of downtown after the Great Fire of 1872, the Back Bay and the South End. Neither pattern is more typical of Boston than the other; in fact, the religious and philosophical underpinnings for both models are as old as the first European settlers. The Puritans came, settled and remained as families with long-term commitments to the area. As families and businesses grew the citizens accommodated the new needs by gradually expanding. New commercial buildings came first, then streets connecting back to the urban center, then more building filled in the street fronts, then more streets and gradual wharfing out along the shoreline with backfilling to create more land. But at the same time it was no sin to grow prosperous (Figure 3); on the contrary, personal wealth was a sign of God's grace. Political institutions were created primarily to enact the laws that would stabilize commerce, including real estate development. The impulse was there from the beginning to create large areas of land out of water in the South Cove, to invent the whole Back Bay neighborhood out of a swamp, to rebuild the entire downtown in just two decades after the Great Fire making it bigger and better than before, to demolish the old West End and create a new residential neighborhood and to relocate the whole Central Artery underground with parks on top. The ambitious entrepreneurial instinct is as much a part of the Boston context as cobblestone streets, brick sidewalks and bay windows.

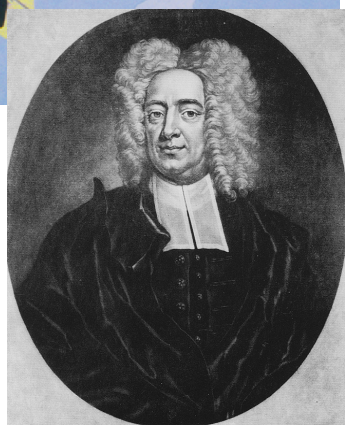


Figure 3

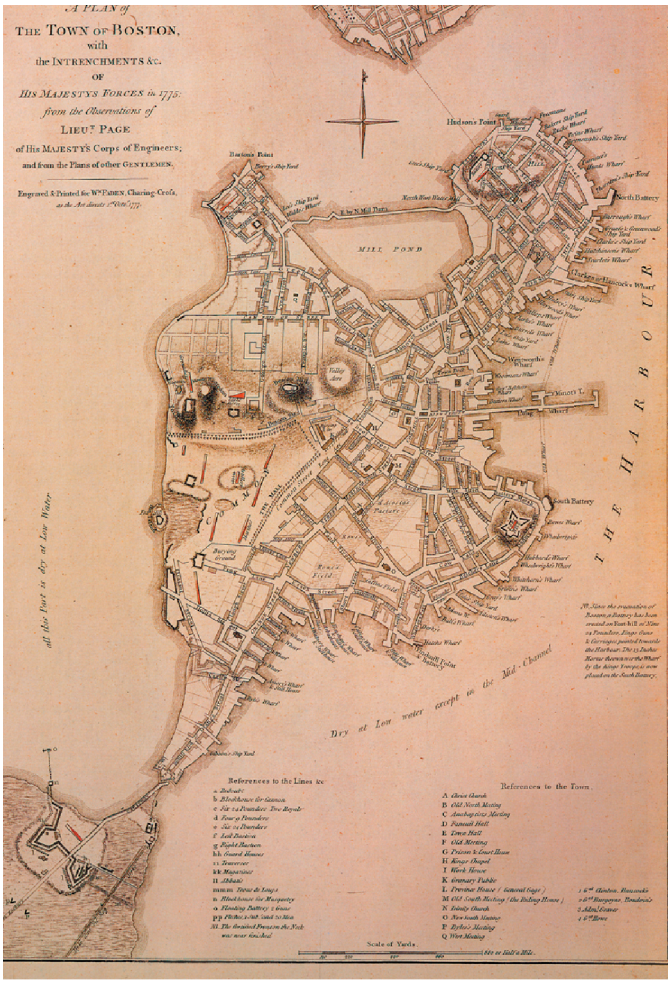


Figure 4


Figure 5

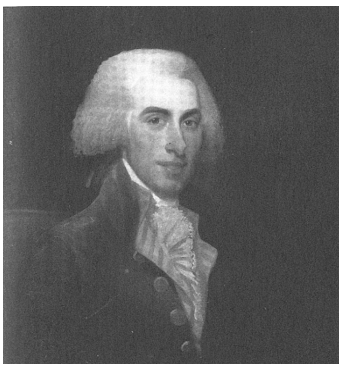


Figure 6

Incremental Growth and Change: Seventeenth Century to 1960

In the earliest maps of the city, John Bonner's of 1722 and William Burgis' of 1728, Barton's Point (as the West End was then called) was located at the far side of the Mill Pond north of Beacon Hill with only one named street, Cambridge Street. But for a few houses, it was an industrial area with a copper works, three rope walks and Lee's shipyard—possible because no bridges yet connected the Shawmut Peninsula to Cambridge or Charlestown. By 1743, however, many more streets appear in the William Price map (Figure 4). Cross-hatching along the street fronts suggests that houses had been built, but in fact the marking is prospective; it anticipates a time when that degree of urban density would exist. A second shipyard appears on Thomas Page's Revolutionary War map with a more realistic indication of the parts of the street fronts that actually were built out, and a clear pattern of urban development emerges with streets dead-ending at the river's edge, waiting for the bridges connecting to Cambridge to be built. The Osgood Carleton map of 1796 shows the first two of these bridges, the West Boston Bridge extending Cambridge Street across the river, and the Charles River Bridge on the east side of the Mill Pond connecting to Charlestown. That year also saw the construction of the first Harrison Gray Otis House (Figure 5), designed by the man who was to become Boston's preeminent architect of the period, Charles Bulfinch (Figure 6). Bulfinch also designed the Joseph Coolidge house facing Bowdoin Square in 1792.

The John G. Hales map of 1814 shows the West End fully urbanized, and part of a continuous pattern similar in scale and character to the central district and the North End. It shows the Mill Pond filled and its streets laid out—another example of prospective map-making since the filling had only begun at the time, but indicating an optimistic spirit regarding future development. The Almshouse, formerly on Boston Common, was designed by Bulfinch and relocated at the edge of the West End. A second bridge to Cambridge, the Craigie Bridge, appears where the Science Park Bridge is located today. The map indicates building materials and property lines, two increasingly important pieces of information in a city built largely of flammable materials, hemmed-in geographically and with only the beginnings of an insurance industry. During this period Bowdoin Square on Cambridge Street emerged as fashionable residential district with several large houses designed by Charles Bulfinch, who himself was born in the area in 1763 (Figure 7). Most notable were the Blake-Tuckerman house of 1815 and the Kirk Boodt house of 1804. Asher Benjamin's Old West Church was built in 1806 nearby. Bulfinch's Massachusetts General Hospital with its famous "Ether Dome" was built in 1817 though William Thomas

Morton's use of the anesthetic did not occur until 1846, the same year that Harvard Medical School moved into the neighborhood from Cambridge (Figure 8). The Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary followed four years later.


Figure 7

The first substantial land fill in the West End, eight acres, was completed by 1835 when the Boston and Lowell Railroad opened its depot north of Causeway Street. (It was the same year that the Boston and Providence and the Boston and Worcester Railroads opened depots in Boston, also on filled land.) All are illustrated on George G. Smith's map of 1835. By 1847 the historic Kirk Boodt house had been enlarged by architect William Washburn and converted into the elegant Revere House Hotel. This pattern of enlarging existing buildings and replacing wood construction with fireproof masonry continues throughout the West End's history and ultimately gives rise to the dense, lively, four- to six-story apartment houses with shops at the ground floor that characterized the neighborhood by the 1940s and 1950s.

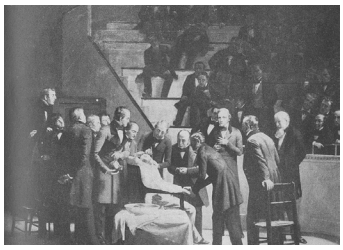


Figure 8

Though Charles Street south of Cambridge Street had been built (on fill) at the time of Smith's 1835 map, it did not then extend north to the West End, although that evolution does begin to appear on the Slatter and Callan map of 1852 along with the filled land and the structure of the Charles Street Jail designed by J. Fox Gridley Bryant in 1851. By 1862, the map by James Slade shows Charles Street extended to Leverett Street and the Craigie (now called Canal) Bridge, and a large piece of filled land extending east from Mass General Hospital with a new hospital wharf on the river side of Charles Street. Except for some further filling for The Embankment the West End retained this urban form for the next hundred years.

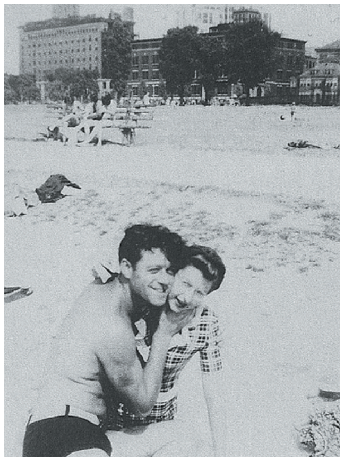


Figure 9

In addition to hospitals, numerous educational and religious institutions were built in the West End as waves of immigrants settled there beginning in the last years of the 19th century. St. Mary's and Alexander Parris' St. Joseph's served the Catholic population which grew as Italians came to the neighborhood, and six synagogues served the Jewish population. The Wells, Wendell Phillips, Winchell, and Mayhew schools were built between 1860 and 1900, and the Faneuil and Blackstone schools early in the 20th century. The Embankment became a recreational resource with a beach on the Charles River (Figure 9). A map from that time shows 51 schools, hospitals, houses of worship, and settlement houses in the West End (Figure 10).


Figure 10

By the 1950s the West End bustled with activity. Scollay Square with its Old Howard theater was an entertainment center. Staniford, Blossom, and Cambridge Streets were busy with commercial activity, and Mass General grew as the city's largest hospital


Figure 11

with the construction of the White wing (Figures 11 and 12). The neighborhood's high density supported a rich, varied, active urban life, but not everyone saw the West End in this light (Figure 13).

Wholesale Change: Urban Renewal in the 1950s

After four decades of economic stagnation and decline in Boston, Mayor John Hynes sought to reverse the pattern and change the image of the city by undertaking several large-scale projects: the Central Artery, the under-Common parking garage, the Prudential Center, and the reconstruction of almost all of the West End. The 1950 General Plan for Boston labeled the West End an "obsolete neighborhood" (Figure 14). The Urban Renewal legislation of 1954 provided federal funds for "slum clearance" if a neighborhood was found to be "blighted and decadent" (Figure 15). Planners made this finding in the case of the West End, and the judgment was supported by the Mayor, City Council, the Catholic Archdiocese, and all of Boston's daily newspapers. The West End was only one of several neighborhoods identified for renewal; about a third of the city was placed in that category (Figure 16). In contrast to the so-called obsolete neighborhood stood the vision for "a new plan" influenced by the most contemporary thinking about urban design and planning (Figure 17). Swiss architect Le Corbusier, a master of the Modern movement in design, promoted in his manifestos the vision of a city made up of residential towers set in parks uninterrupted by streets (Figure 18). Shopping was to happen along internal corridors high up in the buildings. Common sense notwithstanding this vision became the model for the public housing built in the 1950s and 1960s (Figure 19)—much of which was demolished starting with the dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igo project in St. Louis in 1973 and continuing at the present time with demolition and reconstruction under the federal Hope VI program.

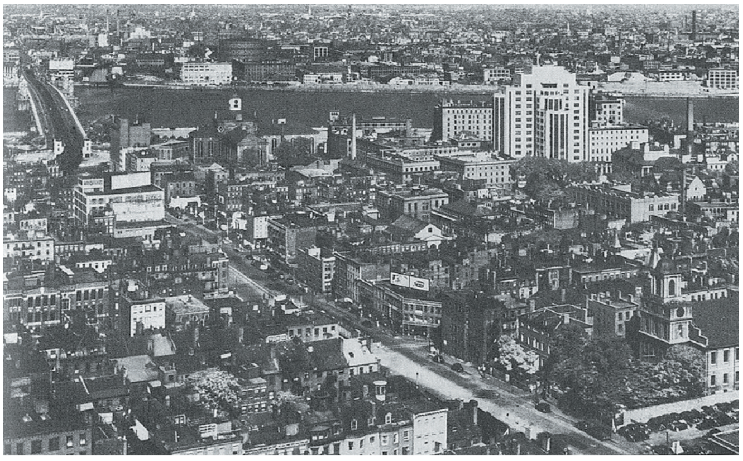


Figure 12


Figure 13


Figure 15

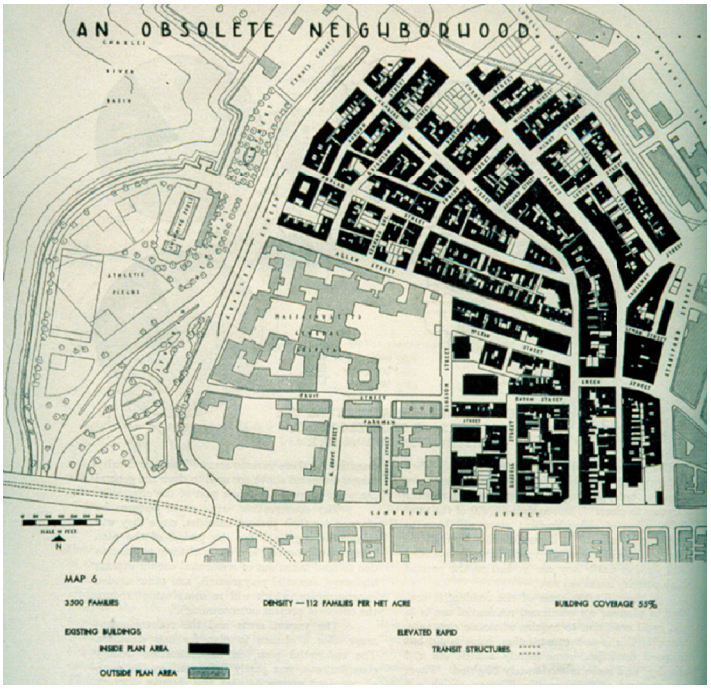


Figure 14

Figure 16

In the West End all but a few structures—St. Joseph's, Old West Church, Harrison Gray Otis House, and MGH—were torn down and the residents and businesses dislocated with little assistance in finding new homes or places of business (Figure 20). The social damage, documented in several studies, most notably Herbert Gans' The Urban Villagers, was equally as devastating as the physical. Howver, the market-rate housing that was created has been far more successful than the aforementioned public housing examples and today it comprises a stable, cohesive residential community with a deep commitment to living in Boston. Residents see the residential West End as an oasis in the city creating a very desirable place to live.

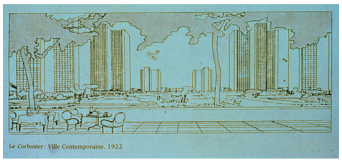


Figure 18

The West End Area today is different from most of Boston's downtown neighborhoods. It has taller buildings, more open space, many fewer streets, better access to transit, many more parking lots and above-ground parking garages, more institutions, and less retail commercial space. These characteristics bring with them both benefits and deficiencies—a sense of spaciousness on the one hand and not enough shops and restaurants on the other. But Boston is a city large enough in spirit to include many different neighborhoods and districts: residential areas as different as Beacon Hill and West Roxbury, commercial areas as different as the financial district and Codman Square. In the context of diversity the West End area is very much a Boston neighborhood.

Figure 19

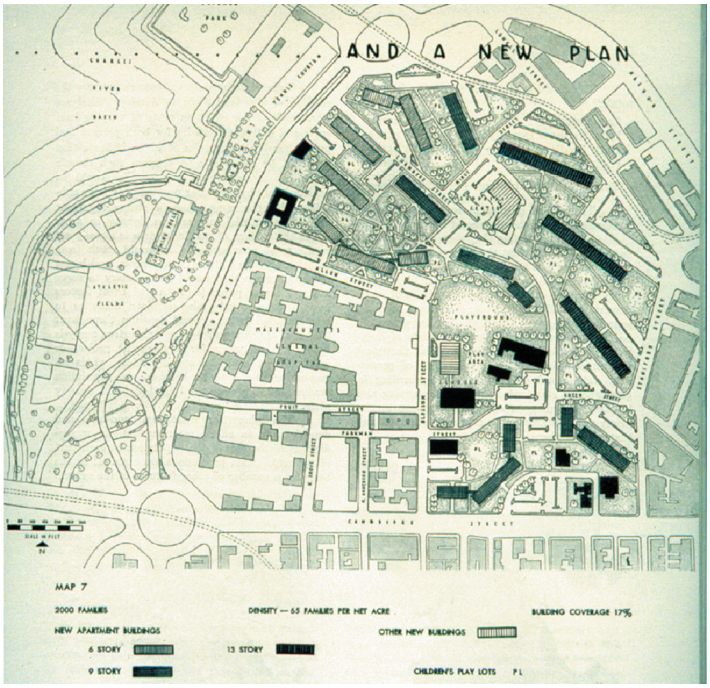
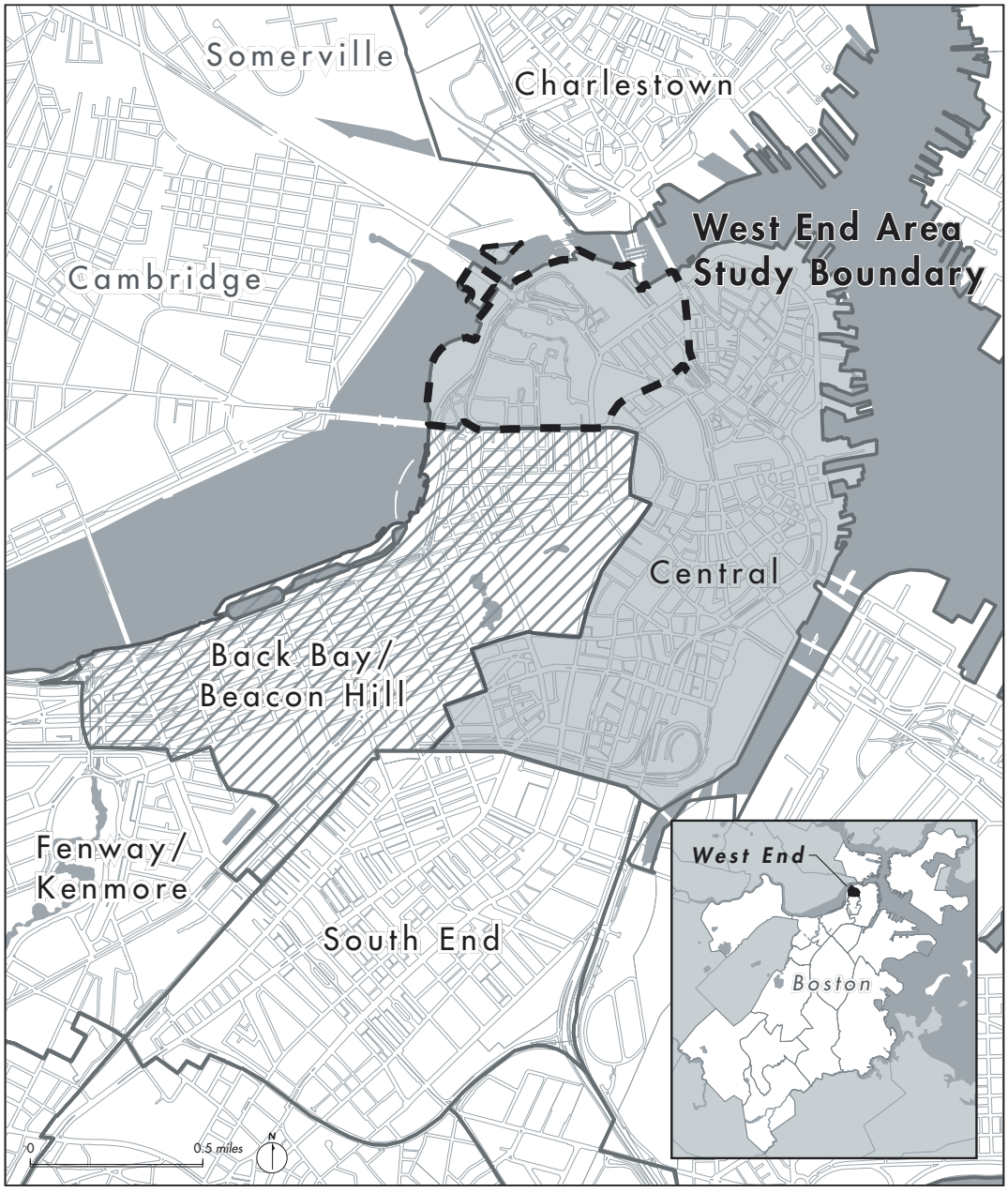


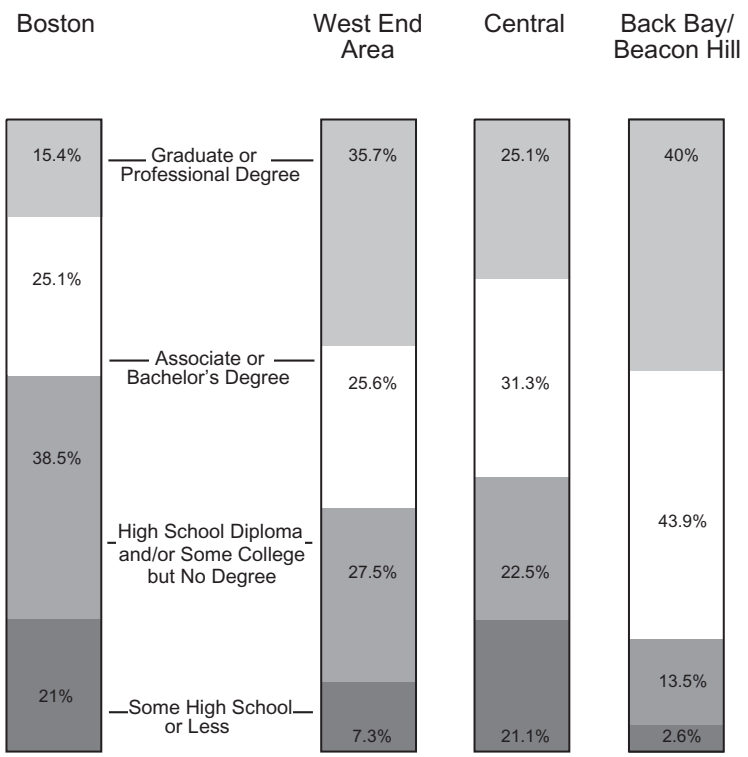
Figure 17

Figure 20

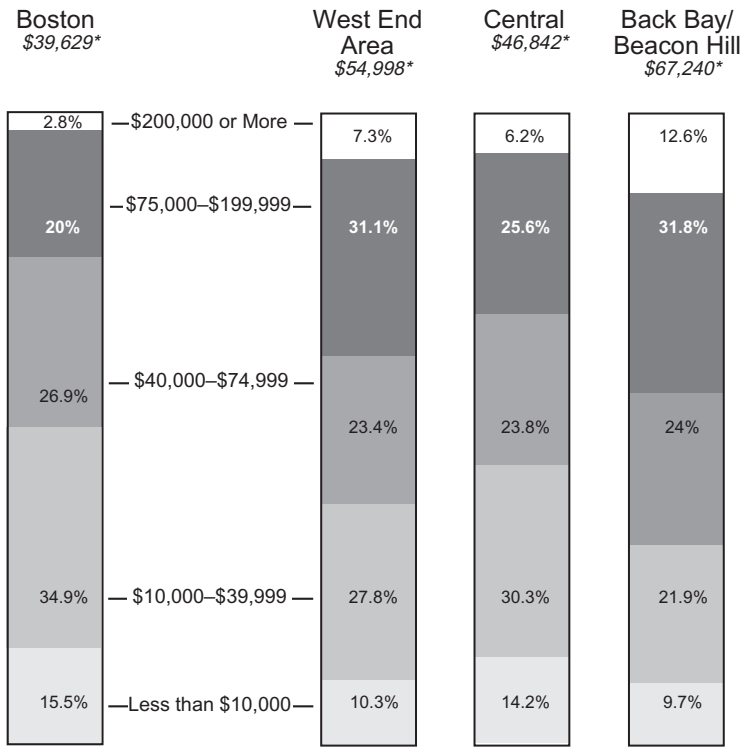
Selected West End Area Census Information

The six graphs on the following pages contain information from the 2000 United States Census. Data on income, race, household composition and other community characteristics is presented for the West End Area, for the Central Downtown Area ("Central"), for Back Bay/Beacon Hill area, and for all of Boston combined. The map below indicates where the boundaries for each of these areas has been drawn for the purposes of providing this background information.



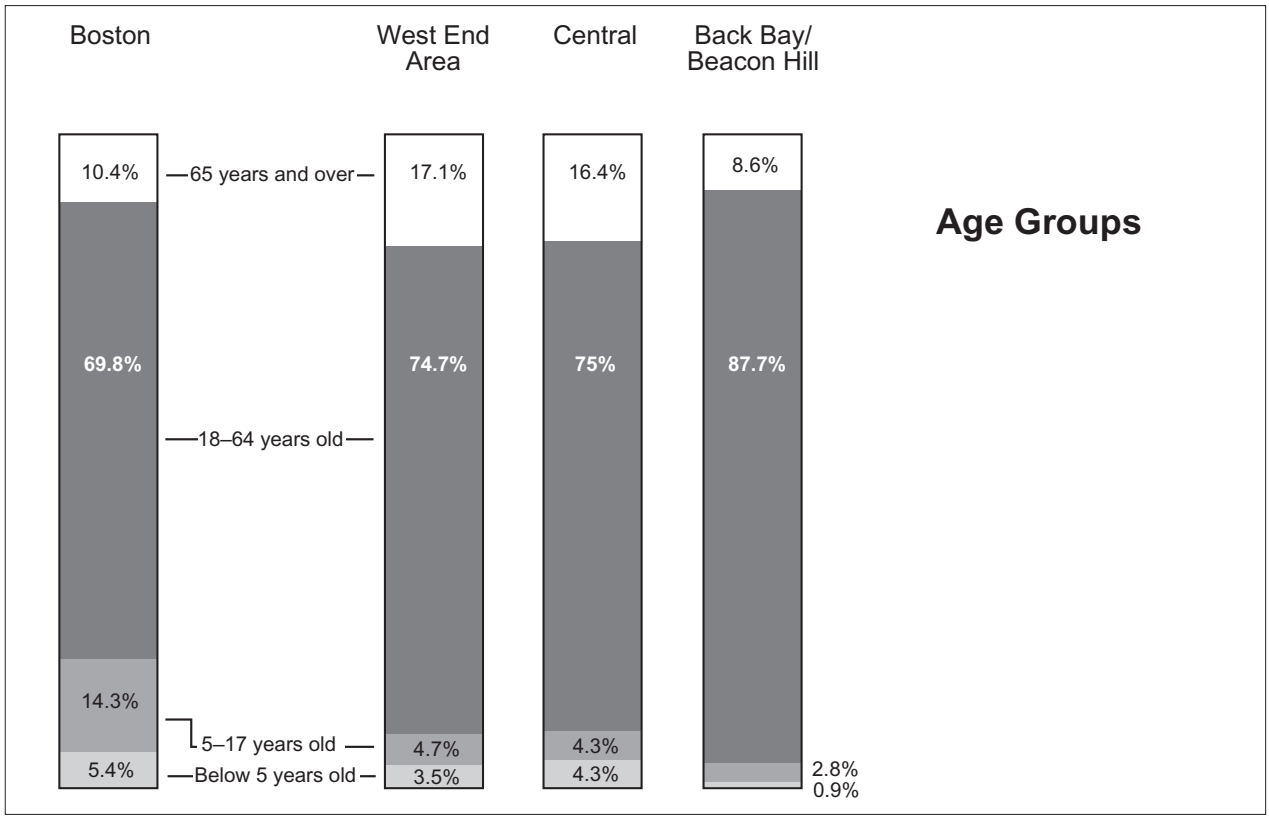


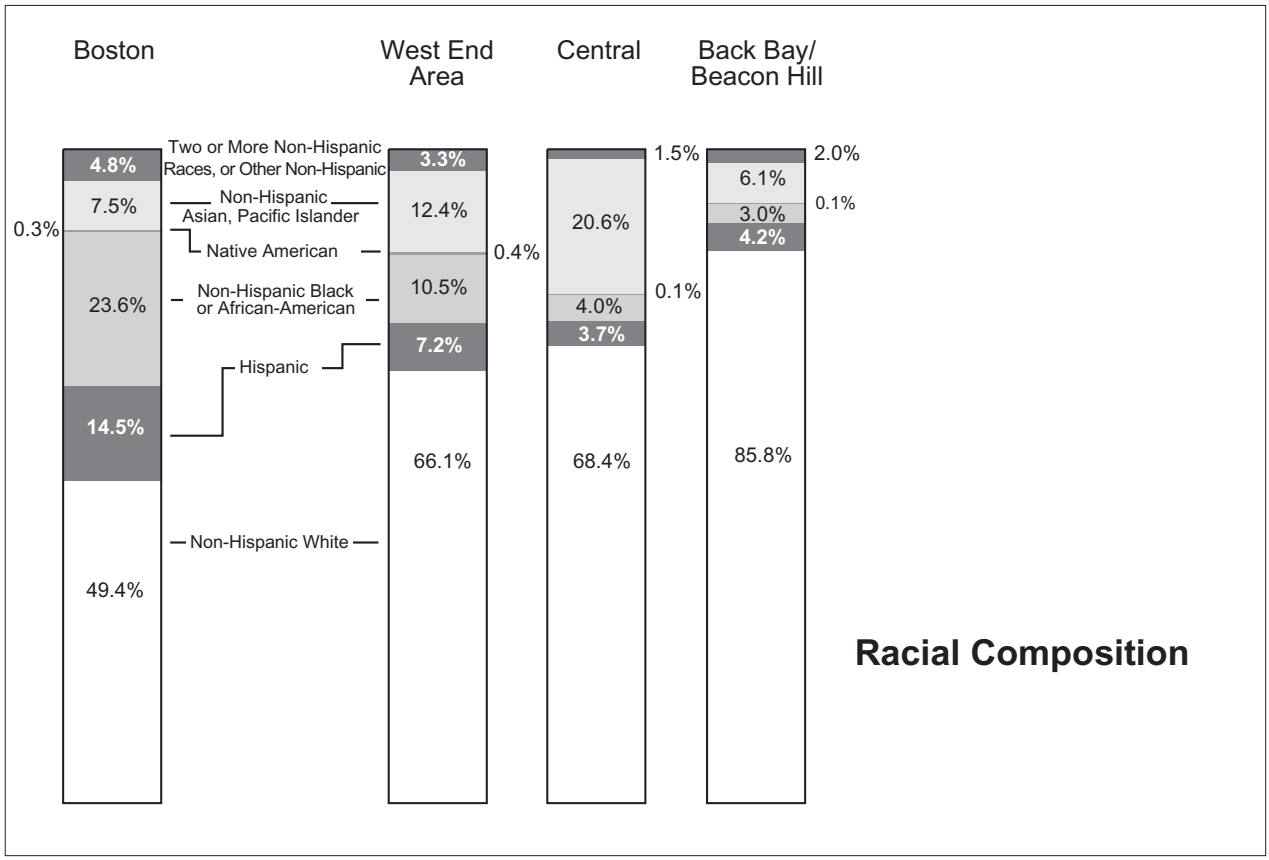
Highest Level of Educational Attainment (For Population 25 Years and Over)

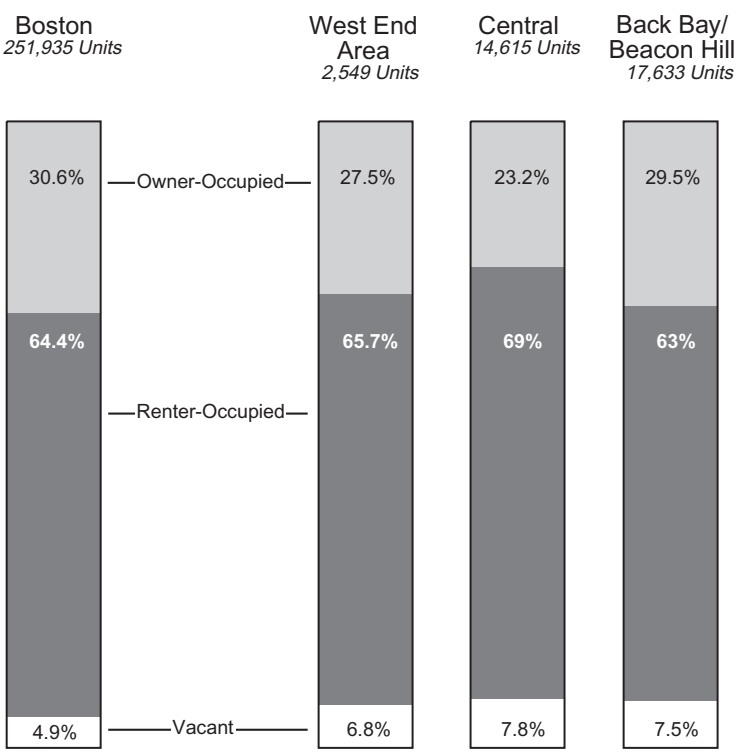


Household Income and Median Household Income

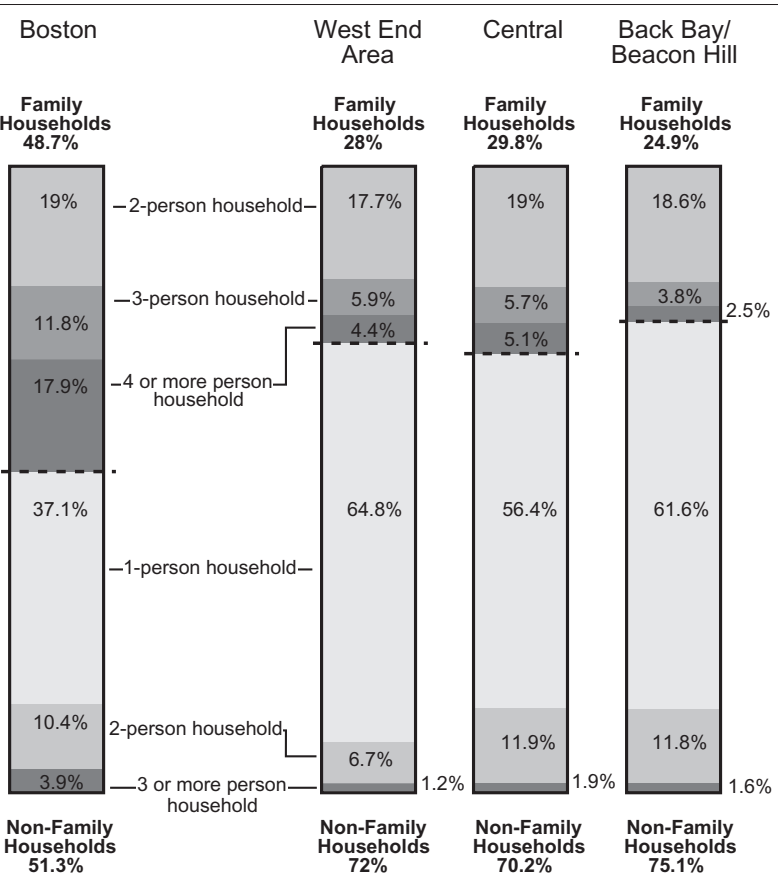
** Median Household Income*


Boston
West End Area
Central
Back Bay/ Beacon Hill
10.4%
65 years and over
17.1%
16.4%
8.6%
69.8%
18–64 years old
74.7%
75%
87.7%
14.3%
5–17 years old
4.7%
4.3%
2.8%
5.4%
Below 5 years old
3.5%
4.3%
0.9%
Age Groups


Boston
West End Area
Central
Back Bay/ Beacon Hill
4.8%
Two or More Non-Hispanic Races, or Other Non-Hispanic
3.3%
1.5%
2.0%
6.1%
7.5%
Non-Hispanic Asian, Pacific Islander
12.4%
20.6%
0.1%
0.3%
0.4%
3.0%
4.2%
Native American
23.6%
Non-Hispanic Black or African-American
10.5%
4.0%
3.7%
0.1%
7.2%
Hispanic
14.5%
66.1%
68.4%
85.8%
Non-Hispanic White
49.4%
Racial Composition



Housing Units and Occupancy



Household Type by Household Size

Definitions

Family: A family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage or adoption and residing together.

Family household: A family household is a household maintained by a householder who is in a family (as defined above), and includes any unrelated people who may be residing there.

Nonfamily Household: A nonfamily household consists of a householder living alone (a one-person household) or where the householder shares the home exclusively with people to whom he/she is not related.

See source http://www.census.gov/population/www/cps/cpsdef.html for further definitions.